Public Perceptions of Energy Issues in Ontario
Report

Prepared for:
The Ontario Energy Board

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1.0 INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2004, Environics Research Group Limited conducted a survey of 608 adult (18+) Ontarians on behalf of the Ontario Energy Board. The survey examined Ontario public and consumer opinion on issues including:

- Concerns about energy
- Consumer confidence and protection
- Responsibilities of the Ontario Energy Board
- Consumer information preferences

The survey was conducted by telephone October 13 and 14, 2004. The margin of error for a sample of 608 is plus or minus 4.0 percentage points, 19 times in 20. Margins of error are greater for demographic and other sub-samples.

This report summarizes the key findings of this survey. The tabular results are presented separately.

The main findings of the survey are as follows:

- Costs/prices are by far the most important concern of Ontarians regarding electricity and natural gas;

- Ontarians show considerable interest in cutting back their energy use to save money, to protect the environment and to ensure future energy supply;

- There is considerable scepticism that consumers' interests are being protected on price issues with regard to electricity and natural gas;

- All of the Ontario Energy Board tasks are seen as important by at least nine in ten Ontarians;

- Ontarians especially want information about how to conserve energy and about their rights and responsibilities as consumers; they prefer, by a small margin, to receive their information from a public regulator over a government department or a company; and they like to get this information through the mails.

2.0 ENERGY ISSUES

Costs/prices are by far the most important concern of Ontarians regarding electricity and natural gas.

Price emerges as the single most important top-of-mind energy issue. When Ontarians are asked what they think is the single most important issue involving electricity and natural gas in Ontario today, a majority mention price issues (54%), with reliability of supply a far-distant second (19%). Fewer than five percent each mention such issues as conservation, keeping it publicly owned, finding renewable or alternative sources, or over-consumption and waste.

Single Most Important Electricity/Natural Gas Issue	
Price issues	54%
Reliability of Supply	19%
Conservation	4%
Keeping it publicly owned/fear of privatization	3%
Finding renewable/alternative sources of energy	2%
Over-consumption/waste	2%
All others	8%
Don't know	8%
Q7. What do you think is the single most important issue involving electricity and natural gas in Ontario today?	

Ontarians aged 30 or more, homeowners and those who have signed a supply contract with an electricity retailer are somewhat more likely to mention price issues. Ontarians aged 18 to 29 are slightly more likely to mention conservation. Ontarians with at least some university education are less likely to mention price and more likely to mention reliability of supply.

While the price/cost issue is the most important top-of-mind issue, conservation to preserve the environment and to ensure a reliable supply are also seen as important energy goals. When it comes to conserving electricity or natural gas, more than nine in ten Ontarians (95%) say that cutting back on energy use to save money on energy bills is very or somewhat important. Similar numbers say that cutting back on energy use to help protect the environment is very or somewhat important (95%) and that cutting back to help ensure that Ontario has enough energy to meet its needs is very or somewhat important (94%).

Importance of Goals				
	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not at all important
Cutting back on your energy use to save you money on your energy bills	71%	24%	3%	2%
Cutting back on your energy use to help protect the environment	68%	27%	4%	1%
Cutting back on your energy use to help ensure that Ontario has enough energy to meet its needs	65%	29%	3%	2%
Q8. When it comes to conserving electricity or natural gas, are the following goals very, somewhat, not very or not at all important to you?				

Homeowners and those who have signed a supply contract with an electricity retailer are somewhat more likely than others to say that cutting back on energy use to save money on energy bills is very important. Women are more likely than men to say that cutting back on energy use to help protect the environment is very important. Older Ontarians, especially those 45 or older, renters and those whose energy bills are included in rent or condominium fees are more likely to say cutting back to help ensure that Ontario has enough energy to meet its needs is very important.

3.0 CONSUMER CONFIDENCE AND PROTECTION

There is considerable scepticism that consumers' interests are being protected on price issues with regard to electricity and natural gas

Ontarians are fairly confident in their ability to manage their electricity costs and in their understanding of their rights as an electricity customer. They are less confident in the electricity industry's ability to maintain a safe and reliable electricity supply, that consumers' interests are being protected on price issues, and that rules and regulations are in place to guarantee their rights as consumers.

Eight in ten Ontarians (82%) agree that they have the ability to manage their household electrical costs, and just over seven in ten (73%) agree that they understand their rights as an electricity customer. More than five in ten each are confident that the electricity industry can provide a reliable supply of electricity (53%) and that there are rules and regulations to protect their rights as energy customers (56%); however, the numbers who strongly agree with these two statements are low, suggesting some doubt on the part of the public. Only one-third (33%) feel their interests are being protected on electricity prices while two-thirds (66%) disagree that their interests are protected.

Consumer Confidence and Protection – Electricity				
	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
You have the ability to manage your household electricity costs	42%	40%	10%	7%
You understand your rights as an electricity customer and know who to contact when you have concerns or complaints about your electricity company	38%	35%	13%	12%
You feel confident that Ontario's electricity industry is able to provide enough electricity to meet the needs of households and businesses now and in future, and is able to deliver it safely and reliably to all parts of the province.	17%	36%	26%	17%
There are adequate rules and regulations in Ontario to protect and guarantee your rights as an electricity owner	15%	41%	21%	13%
You feel your interests are being protected when it comes to electricity pricing	7%	26%	30%	33%
Q9. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the following statements that relate to you as an electricity customer...				

Renters are more likely than homeowners to believe that they can manage their household electricity costs and that there are adequate rules and regulations to protect their interests.

Ontarians who use natural gas are somewhat less confident about their ability to manage their costs than are Ontarians in general with respect to managing electricity costs; however, they are somewhat more confident about reliability and adequacy of consumer protection regulations, and are more likely to feel their interests are being protected on natural gas pricing.

Three-quarters of natural gas consumers (76%) agree that they have the ability to manage their household natural gas costs. Seven in ten each feel that they understand their rights as a natural gas customer (71%) and are confident of the reliability of the natural gas supply (71%). Six in ten feel that there are adequate rules and regulations to protect their rights as natural gas customers (59%). Only four in ten (40%) feel that their interests are being protected when it comes to natural gas pricing while over half (56%) disagree. The numbers who strongly agree that rules are in place, and that their interests with regard to natural gas pricing are protected, are very low, indicating considerable scepticism among natural gas consumers on these dimensions.

Consumer Confidence and Protection – Natural Gas

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
You have the ability to manage your household natural gas costs	35%	41%	13%	8%
You understand your rights as a natural gas customer and know who to contact when you have concerns or complaints about your natural gas company	33%	38%	16%	11%
You feel confident that Ontario's natural gas industry is able to provide enough natural gas to meet the needs of households and businesses now and in future, and is able to deliver it safely and reliably to all parts of the province	25%	46%	18%	7%
There are adequate rules and regulations in Ontario to protect and guarantee your rights as a natural gas customer	14%	45%	18%	13%
You feel your interests are being protected when it comes to natural gas pricing	8%	32%	30%	26%

Q10. Please indicate if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the following statements that relate to you as a natural gas customer...

4.0 ONTARIO ENERGY BOARD AWARENESS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

All of the Ontario Energy Board's tasks are seen as important by at least nine in ten Ontarians.

When asked who is responsible for protecting the interests of residential electricity and natural gas consumers, a large plurality of Ontarians say it us the provincial government (39%). Much smaller proportions mention other organizations, including hydro-electric and gas companies (6%), the federal government (5%) and the Ontario Energy Board (4%). One-third (32%) offer no response.

Who Protects Ontario's Electricity/Natural Gas Consumers? (top-of-mind*)	
Ontario provincial government	39%
Hydro-electric /natural gas company	6%
Federal government	5%
Ontario Energy Board	4%
Government (non-specific)	2%
The premier	2%
Ministry of Energy	2%
All others	11%
Don't know	32%
Q11. Who is mainly responsible in Ontario for protecting the interests of residential electricity and natural gas consumers with respect to prices and adequate, reliable and quality service?	

* More than one answer possible

Men, Ontarians over the age of 45 and homeowners are more likely than others to say the provincial government is responsible for consumer protection on energy matters; woman and younger Ontarians are less likely to name anyone.

When asked who regulates electricity and natural gas, Ontarians are most likely to assign this responsibility to the Ontario provincial government (37%), while much smaller proportions mention the Ontario Energy Board (6%), hydro-electric or gas companies (6%) or the federal government (4%). Over one-third (36%) offer no response to the question.

Who Regulates Electricity and Natural Gas in Ontario? (top-of-mind*)	
Ontario provincial government	37%
Ontario Energy Board	6%
Hydro-electric company/gas distributor	6%
Federal Government	4%
All others	15%
Don't know	36%
Q12. Who regulates electricity and natural gas in Ontario?	

* More than one answer possible

Men and homeowners are more likely than other Ontarians to mention the provincial government as the regulator of electricity and natural gas; women, renters, and younger Ontarians are less likely to name anyone.

Ontarians place a high degree of importance on almost all of the Ontario Energy Board's tasks; none are seen as unimportant. Nine in ten or more Ontarians say that each of the tasks examined – encouraging energy conservation (97%), establishing and enforcing rules for energy companies (97%), providing the public with information about energy consumer issues (96%), setting rates for electricity and natural gas (95%) and handling applications for energy supply projects (90%) – are important. Three-quarters or more of Ontarians think that all these tasks, with the exception of handling applications, are in fact very important.

Importance of Ontario Energy Board Tasks				
	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not at all important
Encouraging energy conservation	79%	18%	2%	1%
Establishing and enforcing rules for companies that supply and sell electricity and natural gas	78%	19%	1%	1%
Providing the public with information about such matters as electricity and natural gas pricing, their rights as customers or legislative changes affecting them	77%	19%	2%	1%
Setting the rates and charges for electricity and natural gas	74%	21%	2%	1%
Reviewing and approving applications for projects related to the supply of electricity and natural gas	60%	30%	4%	3%
Q.13 In fact, the Ontario Energy Board regulates electricity and natural gas in Ontario. Here are some tasks performed by the OEB. For each one, please indicate whether it is very, somewhat, not very or not at all important to you personally...				

Homeowners are more likely than renters to say that establishing and enforcing rules for energy companies, and reviewing and approving applications for energy supply projects, are very important. Women are more likely than men to say that encouraging energy conservation, informing the public, and setting energy rates are very important.

5.0 CONSUMER INFORMATION PREFERENCES

Ontarians especially want information about how to conserve energy and about their rights and responsibilities as consumers; they prefer, by a small margin, to receive their information from a public regulator over a government department or a company; and they like to get this information through the mails.

Survey respondents were asked what topics of information they would find helpful, what is their preferred source of information, and what are their preferred methods of communications.

When asked how helpful various kinds of information would be to them as energy consumers, two-thirds of Ontarians (67%) say that information on energy conservation would be very helpful, and just over six in ten (63%) say that information about their rights and responsibilities as an energy customer would be very helpful. Six in ten (59%) would find information on how to raise concerns or complaints about their energy retailer very helpful. More than five in ten say the same about information on how electricity prices are set (54%), how to choose and energy supplier (52%) and how to voice an opinion on setting energy prices (51%). About four in ten say information on how natural gas prices are set would be very helpful (43%), and one-third (33%) say the same about how energy markets work.

Consumer Information Topics			
	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not at all helpful
How to conserve energy	67%	27%	6%
What are your rights and responsibilities as an electricity or natural gas customer	63%	30%	5%
How to raise a concern or complaint about your electricity or natural gas company	59%	32%	8%
How electricity prices are set	54%	38%	8%
How to choose an electricity gas supplier	52%	33%	13%
How to make your voice heard on how electricity or natural gas prices are set	51%	36%	12%
How natural gas prices are set	43%	37%	18%
How the electricity and natural gas markets work	33%	50%	16%
Q14. I'm going to name some types of information that could be provided to you as an electricity or natural gas customer. For each, please indicate whether the information would be very, somewhat or not at all helpful to you...			

Following a familiar pattern in these findings, women are more likely than men to say that information on how to conserve energy would be very helpful.

Ontarians would rather receive information about electricity and natural gas from a public regulator such as the Ontario Energy Board (38%) than from a government ministry (30%) or from industry sources (26%).

Preferred Source of Information about Electricity/Natural Gas	
A public regulator such as the Ontario Energy Board	38%
Provincial government department such as the Ontario Ministry of Energy	30%
Your local electric or natural gas company	26%
Q15. Where would you prefer to get information about the supply of electricity or natural gas, how prices are set and other related energy matters?	

When it comes to information vehicles, a majority of Ontarians (53%) view information that arrives with their regular utility bills as very helpful to them. More than four in ten (44%) see information sent through the mail as being very helpful. Fewer than four in ten say that media reports (38%), the Internet (36%), advertising (22%) or booths in malls or at events (13%) would be very helpful to them as methods of communicating information about energy matters.

When asked if there are any other sources of information they rely on, more than eight in ten Ontarians said there was nothing (83%). Very small proportions mentioned: radio (4%), television (4%), newspapers (2%), magazines (1%) and word of mouth (1%).

Preferred Methods of Communications about Energy			
	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not at all helpful
Information inserted in your utility bills	53%	36%	11%
Through the mail	44%	41%	14%
Articles or reports in the media	38%	48%	14%
The Internet	36%	28%	34%
Advertising	22%	45%	32%
Information booths in malls, at events, in community centres and others	13%	35%	51%
Q16. There are several ways that information about energy matters can be communicated to you. Please indicate whether each of the following sources would be very, somewhat or not at all helpful to you...			

Women are more inclined to say that receiving information through the mail and with their utility bills would be very helpful; men are more likely to say that receiving information through the Internet would be very helpful. Not surprisingly, those who pay all or some of their energy bills directly are more likely to say that receiving information in their utility bills would be very helpful.

APPENDICES

Survey Methods

The results of the survey are based on questions asked to 608 Ontario residents. The survey was conducted by telephone from October 12 to 14, 2004.

Sample Selection

The sampling method was designed to complete approximately 600 interviews with Ontario residents. Environics uses a sampling method in which sample is generated using the RDD (random digit dialling) technique. Samples are generated using a database of active phone ranges. These ranges are made up of a series of contiguous blocks of 100 contiguous phone numbers and are revised three to four times per year after a thorough analysis of the most recent edition of an electronic phonebook. Each number generated is put through an appropriate series of validation procedures before it is retained as part of a sample. Each number generated is looked up in a recent electronic phonebook database to retrieve geographic location, business indicator and "do not call" status. The postal code for listed numbers is verified for accuracy and compared against a list of valid codes for the sample stratum. Non-listed numbers are assigned a "most probable" postal code based on the data available for all listed numbers in the phone exchange. This sample selection technique ensures both unlisted numbers and numbers listed after the directory publication are included in the sample.

During fieldwork, a total of 13,546 telephone numbers were drawn of which 10,011 were eligible for inclusion. In each multi-person household contacted, the respondents were screened for random selection using the "most recent birthday" method. The use of this technique produces results that are as valid and effective as enumerating all qualified persons within a household and selecting one randomly.

Telephone Interviewing

Interviewing was conducted at Environics' central facilities in Toronto and Montreal. Field supervisors were present at all times to ensure accurate interviewing and recording of responses. Ten percent of each interviewer's work was unobtrusively monitored for quality control in accordance with the standards set out by the Canadian Association of Marketing Research Organizations. A minimum of five calls were made to a household before classifying it as a "no answer."

Completion Results

A total of 608 interviews were completed. The margin of error for a sample of 608 is +/- 4.0 percentage points, 19 times in 20. The margins are wider for regional and demographic sub-samples.